

# ON CERTAIN IMPLEMENTS OF SUPERSTITION AND MAGIC.

ILLUSTRATED BY SPECIMENS IN THE QUEENSLAND  
MUSEUM COLLECTIONS.

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(Plate V and Two Text-figures.)

THE appalling rapidity with which the Queensland aborigines are dying out justifies the publication of these few particulars. Every year the chance of saving their relics and the story they have to tell becomes more and more remote, and indeed it is questionable whether even now it is not too late. There are few localities in Queensland where the influences of civilisation are not apparent, and the native of to-day when speaking of himself and his forbears prefers to draw upon his imagination rather than speak the unsophisticated truth; sometimes he is unable to do so, but be that as it may, the difficulty of sifting the truth from that which is false is becoming increasingly more difficult. These facts were brought home to me afresh during a recent tour in North Queensland, observing this kind of thing at first hand. Little reliance can now, unfortunately, be placed upon anything a blackfellow tells you except in very rare instances. His imaginative faculties run riot on every possible occasion, and the more credulous you become the more does he delight to impose upon you. I have often been struck, in conversation with a native, how imperfect his memory seems to be and how easily connected ideas fade into insignificance, characteristics leading to the rapid elimination of knowledge of customs and beliefs. It is astonishing, also, how easily the native brings himself to believe that which he fancies to be the case. I do not think this ignorance is assumed, but real.

I have seen implements and weapons made by aboriginals about which there can be no possible doubt that they are of modern manufacture, with ideas incorporated, which they themselves have acquired within the last decade or so—implements which bear in every detail of their manufacture the mark of a bungler—and yet these people will declare most solemnly that they and their forefathers have used such from time immemorial. In order to safeguard the interests of scientific research, it is necessary that some mention should be

made of this, especially in view of the fact that tons of material of such faked implements leave our shores yearly to find a way into the collections of other countries; hence it is well to place those that are not aware of it on their guard, and in the interests of square-dealing to question the honesty and integrity of those whites who cause the natives to indulge in such practices, purely for the financial advantage that may accrue.

With the advance of civilisation, magical practices particularly are the first to retreat into the background, and hence the importance of saving every possible record while opportunity permits. The Queensland aborigine differs from his brethren in central and other parts of Australia by the comparative simplicity of his public life. The absence of such elaborate totemic organisations and devices as are recorded of the Arunta<sup>1</sup> tribe, for instance, has doubtless been instrumental in limiting the power of the heads or so-called medicine men of the tribes, and consequently there is an accompanying decrease of magic and superstition, which seems to be particularly noticeable in Queensland, and manifests itself in various ways. Further, it is very suggestive that the absence of "hereditary chieftainships" synchronizes with the non-existence of elaborate ceremonial totemism. There is a remarkable paucity of objects associated with superstitious ideas, and although doubtless many a simple stone, stick, or "what not" may have been used for magical purposes in the past, unfortunately history records but few instances. The cause and effect is doubtless due directly or indirectly to the food supply, for as long as the country can guarantee the native a liberal diet, the tribes, nomadic only within a limited area, live comparatively peacefully and the exercise of magical influences becomes correspondingly diminished. The death of any one member of their tribe, natural or otherwise, was always the signal for revenge and lust, and their firm belief that death could only be due to the evil intentions of someone else was doubtless responsible for the magical death-bone as a medium by which such a death could be easily avenged. The use of the death-bone<sup>2</sup> has been almost universal<sup>3</sup> and is still in vogue to-day in some of the out-of-the-way places of the State, but whether it is actually "pointed" and "sung" or not, its presence alone is still a powerful safeguard in the possession of such as would seek protection from the hands of a wilful foe; many women never venturing out after nightfall without having such a bone carefully secreted in their hands.<sup>4</sup> The concealment of the death-bone is responsible for much ingenuity on the part of the native at times.

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer and Gillen, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*, 1904.

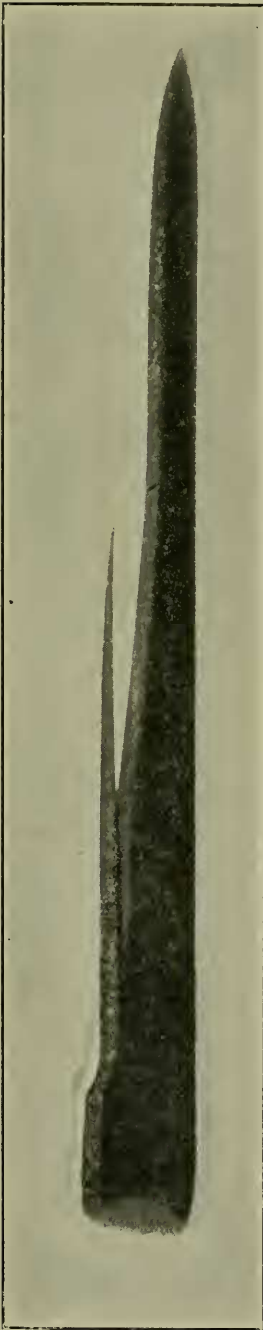
<sup>2</sup> Dr. W. E. Roth, *North Queensland Ethnography—Superstition, Magic, and Medicine—Bulletin 5*, paragraph 144, Brisbane, 1903.

<sup>3</sup> Miss C. C. Petrie tells me that her father, Mr. Tom Petrie, knew no death-bone amongst the members of the old Brisbane (Turrbal) tribe. This is very astonishing.

<sup>4</sup> On the authority of Mr. M. J. Colclough.







Text-fig. 1.—RADIOGRAPH OF THE DEATH-BONE.  
Shown in Plate V, fig. 1. Specimen No.: Q. M. E 14/558.

From the aborigines of the Roper River district, the Wongalarra tribe (Urapunga), Northern Territory, where death-bones are usually of the smaller variety, comes a ceremonial head-dress collected by Mr. M. J. Colelough in 1909, carrying in its interior a death-bone, the presence of which is entirely unknown to anyone save the owner. When the plume is no longer in use the death-bone is placed in its bark sheath and secreted away. (Q. M. Specimen No. E 11/30A.) Plate V, Figure 1, demonstrates a Burdekin River specimen of a death-bone in a bark sheath, bound with human hair and securely fastened with native gum, both ends of the sheath being provided with tufts of emu feathers. The sheath of such a specimen as this is really intended as a disguise, and as the bone is securely fastened with gum one would naturally suppose that it would not be withdrawn except on special occasions. In reality, this is the case. Only at great ceremonies—arranged to settle all kinds of disputes—would such a death-bone be opened up and used, to be again sealed securely after the affair was over. Text-figure 1 is a radiograph<sup>5</sup> of this implement showing the outlines of the death-bone in its interior; the bone probably represents the proximal end of an emu tibia with part of the fibula in position, the upper portion being anchylosed. This death-bone is typical of a more elaborate implement than is usually used in Queensland. Specimens of this sort are rare. (Q. M. Specimen No. QE 14/558.)

<sup>5</sup> I would here like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Doyle for his kindness in making the radiograph for me.—R.H.H.

Thomas<sup>6</sup> amongst others tells us that a great part of the medicine used by the aboriginal is mere mummerly, magical performances which at best act through suggestion. To the lay aboriginal mind these magical performances are the real thing, and, taught as the native always has been to look upon them with awe and mystery, he really believes in their efficacy; but the medicine man himself knows better, and although the power of the magical is strong upon him, he is nevertheless aware that his whole power and status in the tribe has been acquired through trickery practised when required of him. No one knows better than he the impotency of many of his own methods, which he dare not betray except to the very few selected men, who ultimately share his impostures with him.

One of the most universal practices amongst savages is that surrounding the quartz crystal, which is put to all kinds of uses, and first and foremost represents the native medicine man's principal stock-in-trade. The sucking of a stone or a piece of quartz from the wound of a patient—real or imaginary—is usually accompanied with an amount of magic at the expense of the victim, who is often made to suffer considerable punishment. (Coen River and elsewhere.) Even severe gashes are inflicted before the magic stone can be brought to the surface, the victim never suspecting the fraud that has been practised upon him.

We have in the Queensland Museum collections three wooden hardwood points which are claimed to have been drawn from the head of a sick boy by a native doctor (Glenormiston, N.W.C. Queensland). Q. M. Sp. No. QE 14/547.) There is probably a connection between these and the wooden splinters referred to by Roth<sup>7</sup> as characteristic of certain parts of the Peninsula. In connection with these he says: "Sickness is brought about by some other boy putting a wooden splinter or bone into the patient." Several such bundles of splinters, said to have emanated from the now extinct Lankelly tribe,<sup>8</sup> are also in our collection. (Q. M. Sp. No. QE 14/553 and 554.) One of these also contains two wallaby metatarsals and are undoubtedly charms, though Roth states that "wooden splinters at the Coen are believed to be spear-points,"<sup>9</sup> but even these

<sup>6</sup> N. W. Thomas, *Natives of Australia*, 1806, chapter 3, page 43.

<sup>7</sup> Roth, *North Queensland Ethnography*, Bulletin 5, paragraph 137.

<sup>8</sup> The Lankelly tribe, probably an offshoot of the greater Nggeri-Kudi tribe, occupied the territory along the banks of the Lankelly, a tributary of the Coen (Pennefather) River, Cape York Peninsula.

<sup>9</sup> Roth, *Bulletin* 5, paragraphs 139 and 140.

